CITY & SOCIETY

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Remaking place after 'disaster'

A few months after Hurricanes Irma and Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico I was driving around Detroit with Luisa[1], an acquaintance of mine who lives on the island, "Man," she said, "Now parts of PR look like Detroit. They're just gone." Her words were similar to others' description of shattered windows, collapsed foundations, and broken roofs in the days following the storm, including Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosselló during an interview, "Once we flew over the island it looked like a bomb hit Puerto Rico. It was just all wiped out." I do not conduct fieldwork in Puerto Rico. Like many, I followed the storms' sweep and aftermath through news reports supplemented by sporadic social media posts and messages from friends living on the island. Even before that car ride with Luisa, in scrolling through articles and news feeds I was struck by their similarity with descriptions of my field sites in Detroit, where I have spent several years examining the causes and consequences of vacant building demolition. The theme of disaster is resonant in Detroit, with an estimated fifty thousand empty buildings described as the result of the city "having suffered an economic disaster rather than a natural one." Though vibrant and safe neighborhoods exist in Detroit, their presence tends to be overshadowed by accounts of unoccupied homes, warehouses, stores, and factories described as "bombed out" and "a hurricane without water." I briefly dwell on these instances here to consider how reworking the physical remains of destructive processes enlivens them as sites of competing spatial futures.

The intersections between efforts to grapple with vacant buildings in Detroit and severe weather events in Puerto Rico are more than metaphorical. In each place, political leaders

[1] Per anthropological convention, I use pseudonyms to identify my interlocutors.

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celebrate the removal of tangled building remains as setting the stage for much anticipated 'recovery.' Yet appeals to transcendental optics of disaster obscure other causalities (Adams 2013). In Detroit, this includes how present-day vacant buildings, as well as more than 150,000 structures demolished without replacement since since 1960, are not simply byproducts of economic change. Rather, they result from continuously racialized maneuvers by white residents, businesses, and industries to extricate themselves from interactions with bodies and spaces of color (Apel 2015; Sugrue 2005). In Puerto Rico, hurricanes made apparent how more than a century of colonial occupation enabled environmental degradation, strained public health resources, and frayed electrical grids in ways that compounded wind gusts and storm surges (Gahman and Thongs 2017; Soto 2017). Accordingly, when excavators and bulldozers are mobilized as the predicate to 'rebuilding,' be it in Detroit or Puerto Rico, they are positioned in the midst of landscapes, infrastructures, and citizens conditioned through racialized political economic restructuring over the longue durée.

That disasters and the spatial politics of reconstruction can even be located within the anthropological imagination is, in part, due to Anthony Oliver-Smith's explorations of cataclysmic events in Latin America, including his article with Roberta Goldman (1988) concerning post-earthquake reconstruction of Yungay, Peru. Here, Oliver-Smith and Goldman trace how a new city takes shape following a 7.7 magnitude earthquake that leveled almost ninety percent of structures in the 65,000 square kilometer region that includes the provincial capital (105). In addition to thousands of casualties, an estimated 100,000 people were displaced by the quake and the landslide of grey mud that followed (110-11). Oliver-Smith and Goldman's account begins with a particular focus on the efforts to organize the 'new' Yungay as a model of zoned planning that would level the class and ethnic hierarchies that structured life in 'old'

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Yungay (112-115). As Oliver-Smith and Goldman detail, such efforts remained aspirational when the distribution of connections to sewers, electrical grids, hospital beds, and dwelling units reproduced past inequalities between landowners, renters, and rural-to-urban migrants (119-121, 124).

Key to Oliver-Smith and Goldman's argument is a focus on how the "planning goals" articulated by the redevelopment authority never quite matched up with buildings, roads, infrastructures, and experiences as they were actually constructed (119-121). At the same time, they highlight how – when assistance from the redevelopment authority failed to materialize – Yungainos constructed their own permanent dwellings from 'temporary' modules. In this way, Oliver-Smith and Goldman's insights presage theoretical handholds that have become foundational to anthropological engagements with planning and urban development, including how such processes are rarely entirely 'top-down,' but occur through diffused relationships between residents and urban space that only sometimes intersect with those of credentialed planners (Mack 2017). Similarly, the construction of a 'new' Yungay on the basis of particular infrastructures – electricity, sewerage, and public health – as well as Yungaino claims to urban citizenship and exclusion on the basis of these infrastructures, is consonant with contemporary scholarship that evokes similar material understandings of urban politics (Larkin 2008; von Schnitzler 2016).

My goal in this piece is to think critically across Oliver-Smith and Goldman's account of post-earthquake reconstruction in Yungay and the unexpected vantage my research in Detroit offered on the aftermath of hurricanes sweeping through islands thousands of miles away. For instance, Detroit's 2013 municipal bankruptcy settled $18 billion in unfunded liabilities by slashing already minimal city services and employee pensions while largely preserving

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obligations to bondholders. In subsequent years, hundreds of millions in public funds have been channeled into creating 'developable land' through demolition in a city where 40% of residents live below the poverty line. After working in Detroit, many of the individual and institutional actors who routed the municipality through the bankruptcy turned their attention to Puerto Rico's $123 billion in outstanding debt. Post-hurricane strains on the territorial budget only intensified their demands for "fiscal control" in the form of school closures and privatization of public assets. Even before the storm, citizens and activists in Detroit have organized in solidarity with counterparts in Puerto Rico to contest how related processes of "disaster capitalism" (see: Klein 2008) were redirecting control over built environments to highly capitalized developers in both locations. Thus, this brief article reflects on how clearing buildings from land – be it through earthquake, hurricane, bulldozer, austerity, or their collisions – generates the grounds for speculative and actual futures. As these futures alternatively reproduce, contest, and exacerbate existing inequalities, they suggest avenues for critical scholarship that centers 'remade' built environments as sites for the ongoing production of spatial politics rather than as their accomplished results.

Clearing Ground

The capacious notion of disaster through which this piece is organized is purposeful. Hurricanes, earthquakes, imperial rule, financialization, and racialized flight are overlapping processes of grinding destruction and capital accumulation, albeit in varied spatial and temporal registers (Nixon 2011). More importantly, these overlaps become manifest on the ground and in daily life. In Detroit, the privatization of municipal utilities and reduction in obligations to public employees enacted through bankruptcy proceedings was accompanied by the allocation of

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almost $300 million for the removal of 14,000 vacant buildings. Dave, a project manager for a public authority that coordinates demolitions, aligned demolition with bankruptcy as we stood in front of a straw-covered lot on Detroit's far west side where a two-family flat had been recently leveled. In his words, "Bankruptcy and demolition both help Detroit come back from what has truly been a disastrous period of decline. With one we get green balance sheets, with the other we get green lots, and both are good for development." Dave's comment is not isolated, and praise for the profitable ends of creative and actual destruction is common. For administrative actors, structural adjustment, whether it is applied to the municipal budget or physical buildings, is imagined as shaking loose the weight of the past in order to clear way for the future. Indeed, within the municipal budget, funds allocated to the demolition of former homes, schools, and businesses are categorized as "investments."

Making green lots that are "good for development." Photo by author.

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Rebecca Kinney (2016) describes how uncritical, ahistorical efforts to 'renew' Detroit's landscapes serve to reproduce racialized and classed inequalities. Nevertheless, as Sara Safransky (2014) argues, parcels, blocks, and neighborhoods that are the sites of highly-capitalized, invariably whitened visions for the Detroit's future are also the grounds through which claims to decolonial, antiracist, and anticapitalist possibilities are made. For example, when a for-profit agriculture project tilled and harvested by corporate volunteer labor was proposed for a tract of recently demolished lots, including the one I stood at with Dave, the younger, whiter faces of volunteers featured in the development's promotional materials contrasted with those of the predominantly black middle-aged and elderly people who lived in the neighborhood. When current residents gathered to learn about the development at a "community engagement session" mandated by receipt of below-market rate land from the municipal government, one of the assembled noted that the cadastral map showing the project's speculative location appeared to contain lots owned by a longstanding cooperative farm. The development's representative responded affirmatively, "We're really hoping they will partner with us on volunteer opportunities so we can help rebuild the neighborhood." After the meeting, Gert, a member of the collective, which was formed to provide recently incarcerated people of color with living wage employment, echoed what I heard from others in the neighborhood when she explained, "We've got no problem with new people and places coming in. The problem becomes when they want to claim our space to do it. Our farm provides fair wage employment to the community to help them stay safe from incarceration, not 'volunteer opportunities.' We're not some charity case that needs to be 'rebuilt.'" While the proposed project and Gert's cooperative both mobilized the sites of demolished buildings as locations for new forms of production, they did so to benefit distinct constituencies and political economic ends.

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It was these sorts of disjunctures that were on display when a delegation of grassroots activists from Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora visited Detroit in the summers of 2016 and 2017. This exchange – which also included visits to Puerto Rico by Detroiters – was organized when it became apparent that PROMESA, the 2016 US law creating an oversight board for managing Puerto Rico's territorial debt, was similar to Michigan's so-called 'emergency management' statute that allowed Detroit's municipal leadership to be replaced by an unelected bankruptcy attorney whose team enjoyed unchecked abilities to file for bankruptcy, privatize municipal utilities, shutter government departments, and sell public land. As such, the visits offered opportunities for organizers engaged in Detroit and Puerto Rico to grapple with means of resisting the logics of financialized "rescue plans" imposed in both places. On the stoop of a mutual acquaintance's home, Luisa – who would later return to Detroit after the hurricanes – described to me what she saw as a crucial difference between Detroit and Puerto Rico. As she said, "Like here, PROMESA wants to take our health care, our schools, our water, our electricity, our democracy. But we won't ever let them take the land."

In December 2017, months after the hurricanes, I received a WhatsApp message from Luisa that recalled this conversation. "They are coming for our land," she wrote. Indeed, while solar panels and water filtration systems have arrived in Puerto Rico from Detroit and other locations to augment longstanding independent networks, so too have "Puertopians" who seek to transform the island into a haven for ultra-wealthy transplants connected to mainland finance and tech firms. Unlike a 2013 proposal from wealthy libertarians to secure Detroit's "renaissance" through a $1 billion proposal to convert Belle Isle, a 982-acre public park in the Detroit River, into an entirely privatized "city-state," Puertopian visions are presently accruing reality. In WhatsApp messages and her subsequent return trip to Detroit, Luisa told me of mainland

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transplants on door-to-door "tours" through her neighborhood, discussing plans to build new, "off-grid" homes on sites where foundations, cars, gardens, buildings, and human bodies indexed current occupancy. As one tourist exclaimed within earshot of Luisa's stoop, "It's such a shame nobody will come back here to rebuild." In this context, 'rebuilding' not only invigorates political economic and demographic transformations designed to bolster corporate capital (Bonilla 2018), it appears to do so through an all too familiar colonial optic in which territorial visions for expansion and improvement are predicated on the racialized erasure and ignorance of already existing claims to space[2].

Toward a "better" place?

In framing their article, Oliver-Smith and Goldman ask, "Following a disaster, should a city be rebuilt on the model of the pre-disaster city, or should time be invested to design and construct a 'better' city?" (105). Here, the authors here appear to reflect popular hopes for urban planning, specifically that spatial tinkering atop a 'blank slate' will prepare the ground for relational worlds that are more equitable and sustainable, or even a bit less intolerant (Holston 1989; Newman 2015). For Oliver-Smith and Goldman's part, they arrive at the conclusion that the 'new' Yungay, with its incomplete infrastructures and housing projects, failed to improve upon what it replaced. Yungainos who inherited property or ethnic privilege before the earthquake might indeed have inhabited a 'better' place in its aftermath, one where their access to improved housing, land, sewers, and electrification was fashioned by denying them to others. Such results not only make apparent just how uneven aspirations to improvement can be, it also

[2] We might think of this as a continuation of imperial visions that render lands and bodies of color as invisible and open to seizure (See: Miles 2017; Mundy 2000).

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reminds us of how they are contoured by logics that cohere complex histories of race, class, gender, and colonial encounter.

In this way, the extent to which 'rebuilding' is a process of redressing inequalities is less a question of whether new material products or spatial possibilities exist and more one of their distribution. What gets built up following a disaster might be 'better,' but for whom and to what ends? For instance, Joshua Akers' (2015) contends the austerity-driven restructuring of Detroit's landscape illuminates how emergencies – fiscal and otherwise – enable cities to be made locations of emergent "management for markets rather than population" that makes creditors whole through reduced services and sales of public assets (1842). Based on the brief discussions of Detroit and Puerto Rico above, we might add that such management operates by drawing specific, already privileged populations into the orbit of spatial transformation, all while facilitating conditions for pushing others out.

Yet, Oliver-Smith and Goldman's question about the redemptive imaginaries and actualities of post-disaster reconstruction raises still other questions about the practice of scholarship from such locations. Following Clyde Woods (2002), we might consider whether anthropological and related scholarship that originates from spaces affected by violence – be it the fast violence of an earthquake, the slower violences of ethnic or racial supremacies, or their interstices – positions their uneven results as preordained. As Woods contemplates scholarship that positions African American people and communities as only ever being sites of marginalization, he asks, "The same tools that symbolize hope in the hands of the surgeon symbolize necrophilia in the hands of the coroner. […] Have the tools of theory, method, instruction, and social responsibility become so rusted that they can only be used for autopsies?" (63). Put in Woods' terms, Oliver-Smith and Goldman offer an autopsy that lays bare how post-

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earthquake rebuilding both animated and extinguished hopes for a more equitable Yungay. Any further motion or agitation toward that end is foreclosed, with Yungainos a fossil of historical decisions whose possibilities reside squarely in the past. Consequently, Oliver-Smith and Goldman make apparent how analyses organized around the presumptive success or failure of particular plans for 'better' worlds can imbibe the logics, categories, and conditions that authorize such projects, foreclosing other possible politics, temporalities and spatial eventualities.

To be clear, my goal here is not to argue for scholarship that consistently searches for inherently 'hopeful' or 'resilient' lives emerging from conditions of precarity or oppression[3]. Rather, following Woods and others, I seek to emphasize how conditions of ethnic hierarchy and racialized dispossession are not foregone conclusions, but projects continuously refashioned in response to critique (see also: McKittrick 2006). As is evident on the ground in places like Detroit and Puerto Rico, the identification of sites of 'disaster' and the organization of 'rebuilding' in its wake are not only locations through which white supremacy and imperial disregard can be concretized, but also processes through which they are encountered and contested. When Luisa and other Puerto Rican activists join with comrades from Detroit and elsewhere to strategize about how to counter deracinating forces of austerity, displacement, and disaster capitalism, they direct our attention to how such struggles – while seriously difficult – are ever present endeavors rather than petrified remains. In particular, they highlight how idealized visions of land and balance sheets wiped clean by the forces of hurricanes and bulldozers can work to conceal the caustic reproduction of racial and colonial supremacies. Moreover, as collective, antiracist, and decolonial lives take hold adjacent to visions for

[3] Catherine Fennell (2015) offers an incisive summary and critique of this vein of scholarship in her account of Chicago public housing redevelopment (207-38, 250-51).

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racialized capital accumulation, they suggest possibilities for scholarship that considers how the predominant material and spatial politics articulated through rebuilding are never totalizing nor completely fixed in stone.

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